

Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices
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Week – 05
Lecture – 23

Hello everyone, this is Rajarshi Sengupta and we are talking about here, on the embroidered narratives in this week. And this in installment we will be talking about the Kantha quilts of Bengal and the allied practices. So, let us start with what is Kantha quilts. We have already given some introductory information on Kantha quilts. So, let us get a little more into that, that what kind of this specific kind of quilts that we are talking about here.

So, in terms of Kantha quilts, what we find that, it is a very specific practice that had been there prevalent in the eastern India and mostly in the region of Bengal, and when I say Bengal, I mean the undivided Bengal, the Bengali speaking regions, and which will



now divided in two places that is West Bengal in India and Bangladesh as an entire country. So, this area is what we find that the reused, sort of like the reuse of the cloths and which are the wearables, at the same time different kind of cloth which were sort of like I mean there with the households. And then it is a way of sort of recycling it or one can also use the word upcycling it. So, it is kind of like in one hand we can see that in the

making of the Kantha is also a way of like I mean sort of responding to certain kinds of situations that can be economic, that can be cultural, that can be sociological. And in by that what I mean is that if there are certain kind of economic constraint, or if there are like certain kind of ideologies around reuse, all those things we find them to be brought together in making the specific kind of quilts in Bengal. So Kantha is basically this quilted fabric in which we find that layers of used cloth are put together one after another. And then this running stitch (... that we have already discussed in our earlier lectures) is put together for ... joining each layer with each other. And it is sort of like I mean if we think about the layers are like this, this horizontal line then the running stitch sort of like I mean joins these layers one after another. So, only this part of the stitch would be visible on the surface like here we see only part of the stitches are visible. So, this is how like I mean the stitches would work in this. And that is how it sort of like I mean joins all those layers together. So, in one hand one can also say this I mean this particular kind of running stitch which is also known as the kantha stitch and that comes from the word kantha because of this quilting technique. So, this stitch and making of kantha and this



term all those things are connected in that way. So, how this particular technique

brought together the aesthetics of making kantha but also at the same time the necessity of putting all those layers together in this particular way.

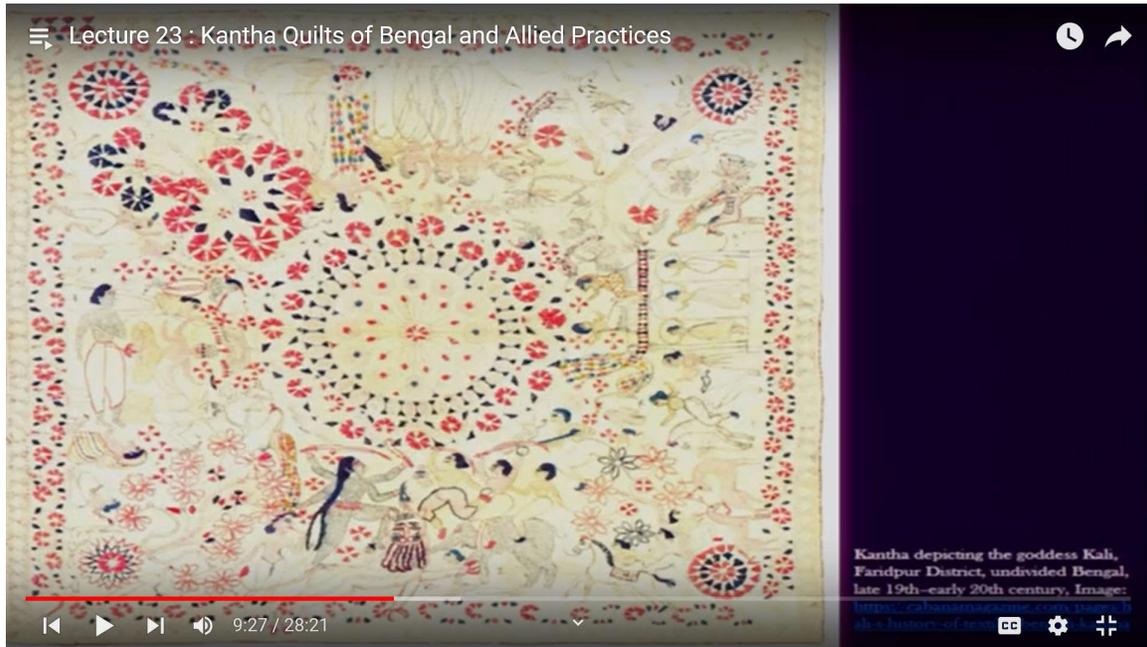
So, what happens in kantha what we find that usually I mean if we see historically we find that there are those undyed fabrics mostly like saree or dhoti and which are not dyed and so that is the reason it has this unbleached sort of white or kora background (the kind of one we see it here). So, this kind of fabrics we see them to be like I mean put together

and why this kind of fabrics are put together, it is because these are the fabrics which are worn by common people. So, we are not talking about like I mean those super fine fabrics like muslin or gangajal and things like that which were brought to the Mughal court. We are also not talking about those highly specific, those specialized brocade fabrics like baluchari sarees or something else. But here we are talking about the clothes which are worn by common people. So, that is the reason we find usually like I mean this unbleached kora cotton is something that is used here and that is the reason what we find here is this the background is usually unbleached or white and then on the top of that we have certain colors which are used and for like I mean making those lines those are visible on kantha. Whereas there are just white yarn or thread that is used for like I mean putting together the layers and that is the reason this kind of this ripple effect is created here for the continuous running stitches. But then on the top of that we also find that in some places very selectively color is used. So, for example here we find how red and black threads are used then here there is a selective use of blue and this kind of this threads we find it there. For kantha historically we find that this kind of threads were also recycled. It's not really that the dyed yarns are brought from the dyers workshop and then used for the kantha. But it's usually what would happen that if we think about a saree then the sarees would have these thin borders (the sarees for the commoners). A lot of times we find that they would have the thin borders in red or black or just like simple indigo is perhaps a rare occasion; but like I mean this kind of colors we can find them and the rest of the saree would be just unbleached white. So, these borders are something from which like I mean this threads are extracted. So, if a saree is being torn or the saree is used and if it is overused and then like the border sort of like I mean fall apart then those threads are sort of like I mean taken out of those borders and then reused in the form of making embroidered kanthas. Now since for kantha what happens is that, you are piercing through the layers and sort of like I mean you know you are adding to the already constructed fabric surface so it gives a kind of stability. So, if this threads from the saree border it cannot really sustain in a saree but for the technique of embroidery technique of like I mean sort of like inter stitching it through this fabric it gives the stability and that is how it gets a new life and it sort of sustains that way.

These are the ways in which we find that how kantha is a practice (which is a commoners practice predominantly) and this kind of practice it sort of makes the maximum use of the fabric or the yarn or the threads which are already existing and not really adding something from outside except for the needle and then of course like I mean you know the imagination or the ideas that one to sort of like I mean implement upon this kanthas. So, these are the kind of things we find in terms of like I mean the kantha making. And when we also then consider this idea of ornamentation, because when we consider that the kantha stitch or like I mean this particular kanthas that we see we cannot really ignore the kind of visuals that appear on the top of the kantha and we have already mentioned that how this continuous running stitches in particular directions (if we think about like I mean this direction, this direction or like I mean the spiraling around this direction), it is a very thoughtful way of like I mean doing the stitches. So, one can say that I mean it is a thoughtful act of ornamentation. So, if we think about it one can say that I mean this is also part of the aesthetics however we also need to understand that how this is contextual in this case. So, this particular kind of like I mean this directional stitches are also there for giving stability to this fabric (like the layers of this fabrics this used fabrics) and then stitching them in particular way or sort of like circling them and so on. So, that also adds to giving stability to the fabric instead of just like weaving them or like I mean just putting like running stitches horizontally or vertically across the fabric. Also like the distance between them is something that matters and that is because like I mean if the distance between these two parallel lines of stitches are more then there is a chance for the fabric to again be less stable. So, that is the reason there is a requirement for them to have like I mean those really close lines of these stitches at those parallel lines of this stitched line which are created on the top of the kanthas. So, this if we consider this acts of like I mean how the stitches are done then we understand that the ornamentation is something that is contextual (something we have already addressed that how Oleg Grabar and the other art historians they would consider that ornamentation to be much more contextual) something that has its socio-political value and then we can add to that by saying that how that also is very much dependent on the kind of material that we are using and that is much applicable for the making of kantha. So, considering these things

we can understand that ornamentation, kantha stitch and then making of this kind of quilts all these things are interconnected.

Now talking about kantha then what is it used for? Like I mean if we think about that

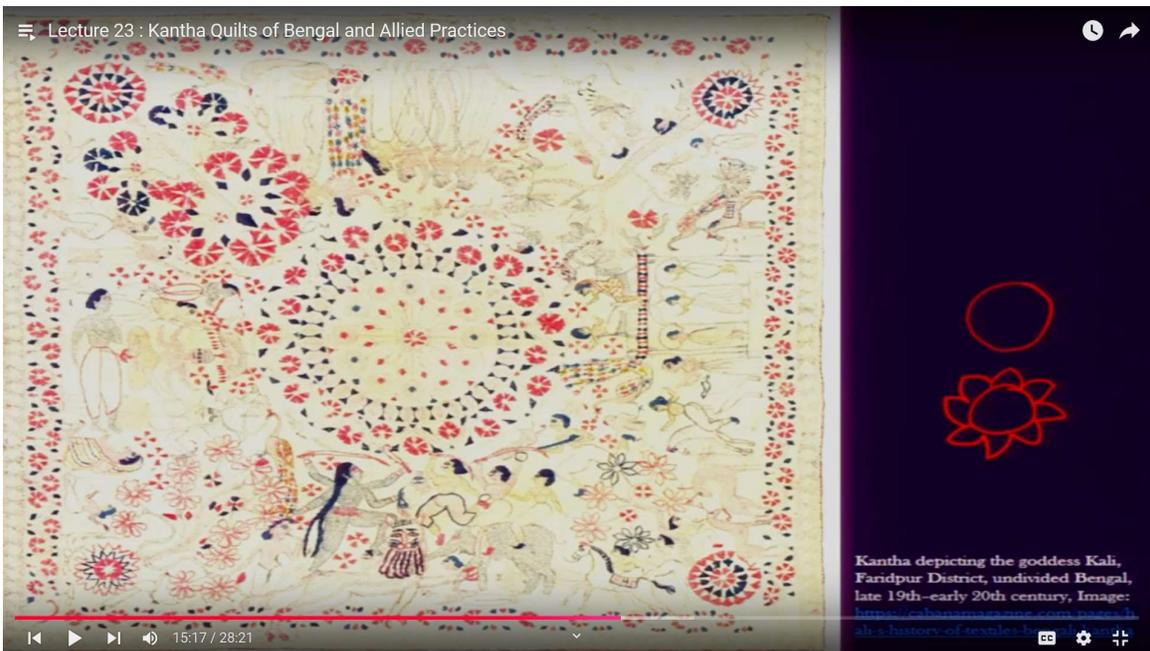


there are the sarees or dhotis and things like that and then the layers of uses sarees are put together for making a kantha and on the top of that we see that I mean how those dyed yarns or the threads are used for executing a number of ornamental motifs. So, what is it used for? So, in terms of kantha we find there is a varied range of usage for it and some of them are made as quilts. Like the one we can see it here on the screen. It is a squarish kind of a quilt and it is pretty big in size and some of them can be used as bed spreads or bed covers, whereas the other ones can be used as floor spreads. Then there is a particular kind of kantha in which also like I mean these squarish or rectangular pieces of fabric are made into this quilted one and then those are stitched into making bags something that is called as arshilota and then there is also something called galicha. Galicha is like a floor spread. Then we also find that the smaller pieces of this kanthas are made which are made as diapers for babies and this is something that is very important in this case that why this kind of fabrics are used for making diapers; and that's because that since we are talking about used fabric, used cotton fabric that is used by people and then it is washed

several times and then it kind of like I mean gets this softness in it and we have already spoken about what is the role of like hand spun yarn. If you are thinking about like this kind of fabric and before 19th century and so on we find that most of this fabric would be (I mean of course all the fabric would be) hand spun. So ... with uses the twist in the yarn loses slightly, then it gives the softness to the fabric. ... for that reason the used fabric would be much more softer than the ones which are newly bought. ... that's the reason for like I mean making a kantha and using it for diaper for the babies is something that we can understand it is much more suited for the skin of the babies, it does not harm them or it is soft on them. So those kind of the material qualities we can consider that in what all different cases kantha quilts can be used for. In one hand that we see how kanthas are something those are the recycling that takes place that the sarees which cannot be worn on the body then making them into a quilt that can have a defined redefined purpose altogether and then the value system around it also changes. In this case we find that it's not just about making it stable or giving it a new purpose but then the material quality of it is also recognized that how this kind of material can be much more softer on the skin even though it is quilted and that's the reason it can be used for babies. So this kind of like I mean different purposes we can find them to be there in making of the kantha if we consider the material qualities.

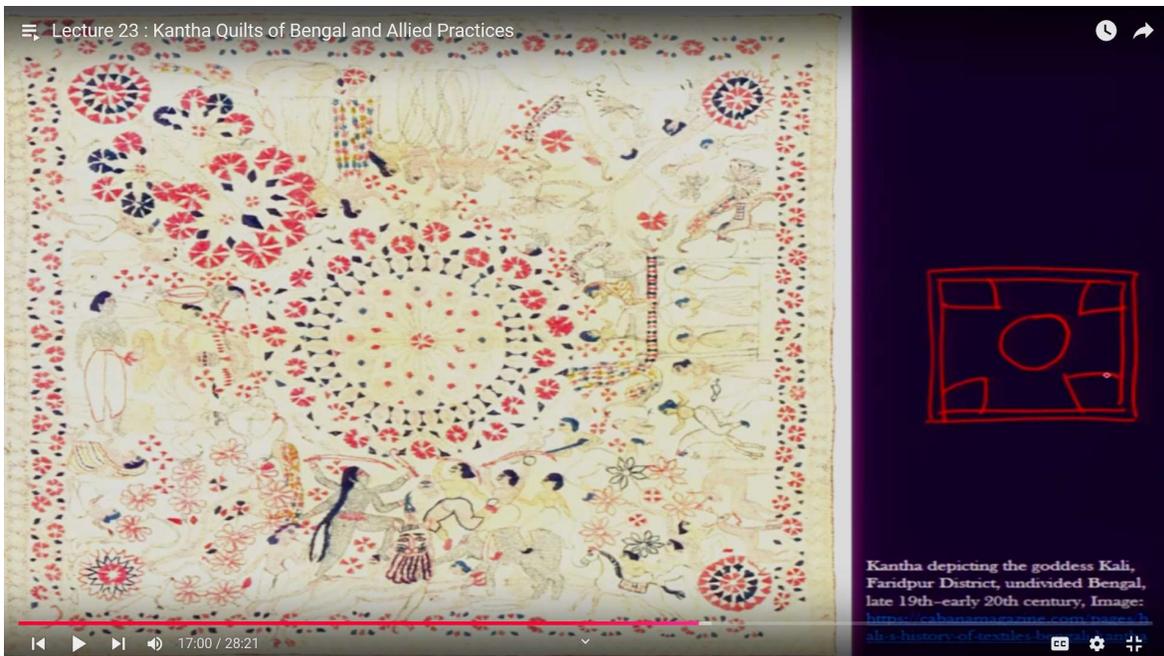
Now let us come back to what are the things we can see in the visual. So in the kanthas what we find that there are prominent borders, I mean the ones which are used as bed covers, bed spreads or like the ones which are sort of put on the floor and usually a lot of times we find that when the guest visit kantha is put on the places where people can sit or like I mean in front of them and so on. So this kind of acts that definitely requires that certain kind of imagery- if the imagery can be welcoming imagery or if there are particular kind of occasions ceremonies and so on in those cases also certain kind of imagery are required. Then a lot of times we also find that the kanthas are gifted at particular times in persons transition. So if woman is getting married then their mother or like the elder women members in the family they would give the ...bride kantha and then those kanthas would have particular kind of text or imagery which are related to married life. Then with childbirth certain kind of kanthas are gifted and all of them are made by

the people in the household or in the community. So this is how like I mean how kantha is something we find those are made by the community people for the local consumption and not really for overseas trade or something else that many of the other fabrics we have spoken about are involved in. So let us come back to the kind of ornamentation that we find there. So in this the kantha that we have on screen here is a complex one in which we find that there are two sets of borders. One set of border in which we find this diamond motif kind of like I mean continuing across this all the borders and in the inner border we find there is this creeper motif with flowers and that also sort of men continues across the this borderline. Now inside of that we find that in the center there is usually this the Lotus motif. At the Lotus motif is something that we find like a circle, sometime it's a circle and then much more a geometric kind of depiction of a flower instead of like I mean having a much more sort of recognized motif of a lotus. But the thing is that I mean we see that this either the stylized geometric version or a representational version of a lotus is usually present and that sort of like I mean constitutes the center of kanthas. Something we have already seen that it is there in the other kind of fabrics as well like Kalamkari and then



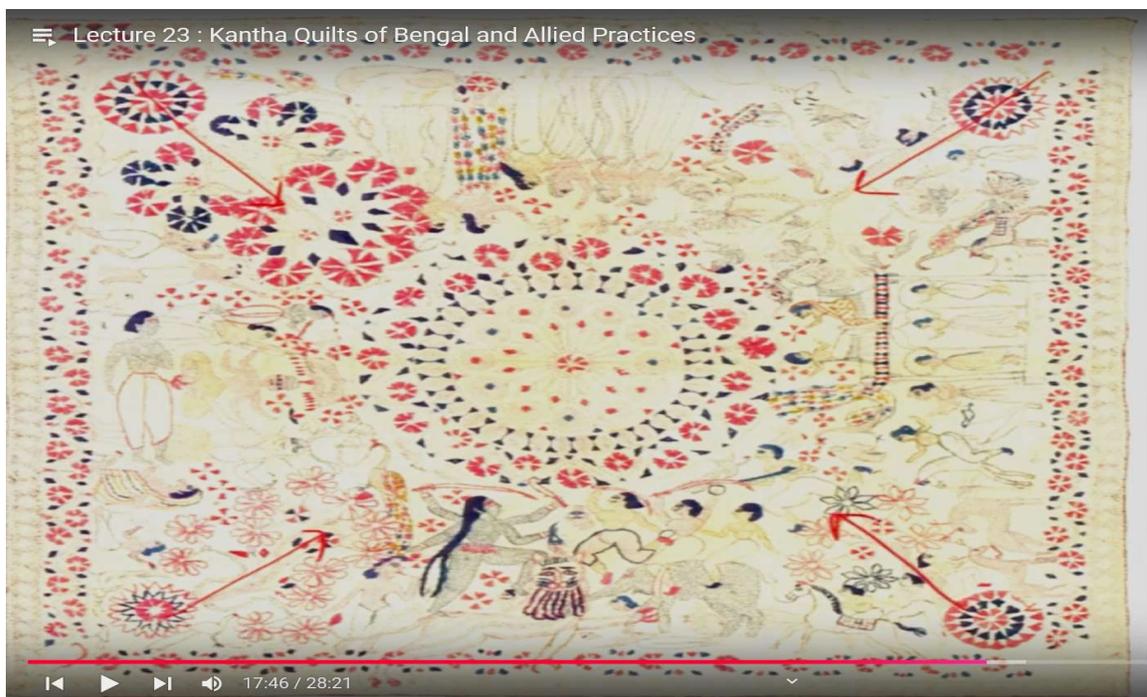
like I mean certain carpets and so on. So, in one hand that this Lotus motif is something

that the art historians have interpreted as symbol of the cosmos or like I mean how Lotus is something that has its high significance in the Indian Hindu philosophy and of course like I mean in the Islamic philosophy it was also been sort of adopted as well. But then we can also see that I mean what Lotus does and this Lotus which is also called Shatadal that means like there are hundreds of petals of it. So, it unfolds and then like I mean it sort of folds with sunset. So, this this folding and unfolding is something we can find it to have like I mean how when it is there at the center it gives the stability for its circular formation and also like its ability to sort of like I mean bring together the other elements from the different parts of the kantha towards the center. So those are the things we can consider that alongside the philosophical aspects we can also see that why there is also this visual aspect and this decision-making that is involved in using a lotus motif at the center. Then with the lotus motif at the center we also find that usually in a kantha (like



this) we have the Lotus or the flower motif at the center, we have the borders in all the sides and then in the corners there are certain motifs which point towards the central motif and this is also something we have seen in form of konia chakra and that is there in

Kalamkari textiles, that is there in a woven and embroidered other kind of fabrics which are used on floor or hanging and so on. So, the similar kind of strategy is used here in kantha as well and in this kantha what we find that this vegetal motif (like a tree) and with like I mean it's blossoming, something perhaps we can associate with blossoming of life, flourishing of life. So, this tree motif is something that is used as this corner motif, even though all the tree motifs are different from each other but we can still see that I mean how this tree motifs are used here which sort of directs the viewers gaze towards the center. ... then like at the center we have the Lotus motif as already I have mentioned. So, this is the compositional arrangement we find in a lot of kanthas.



Now the other thing what we see in this kantha is something we find that how there are figurative narrative elements which are added. Now in kantha we find that it's a really interesting kind of coexistence between different kind of motifs. ... so for example we can find, how certain kind of this figurative narrative elements ... [like in] this particular section, here we see an image of goddess Kali and then goddess Kali is riding a lion and then we have like a set of people here perhaps the Asuras and so on and they are riding an elephant and then they are sort of marching towards goddess Kali and goddess Kali is seen here as this valiant woman who has her lock sort of like I mean falling towards her

knees and then she is valiantly fighting this three men who are there on the elephant back and they are sort of marching towards goddess Kali. Since this is certainly a narrative scene we can find and then there are decapitated bodies (like I mean lying here) that sort of like I mean gives a sense of this war like scene and then there is also an attendant figure (we find here) who sort of is rejoicing because of the victory of goddess Kali. So this kind of like I mean elements what we find that to be there in like the Bengali temple and other visual representation and of course like I mean as we know that the Shakta cult in Bengal (...the cult of worshipping the great goddess) is has been prevalent for the Hindus, I mean alongside the Vaishnavas and Shaivas. So, in those cases we find how the Shakta narratives they always make prominent presence in the visual culture of Bengal. So, we see that those kind of figurative narrations they come up in the Kanthas very often. Here we also have (..... in this section...) depiction of God Brahma, who's sitting here and then we see Vishnu who's there in the Anantashayana posture and in which like we find from his navel this Lotus comes up and from which like Brahma appears. ... here we have this very typical depiction of the Bengali Shiva. So the Bengali Shiva would differ from like the other versions of Shiva in Hindu context in other parts of the Indian subcontinent in which Shiva is seen as this handsome young man and whereas in Bengali version of Shiva we find that he is sort of like I mean he flaunts his flabby body ... and he is seen much more as this a married Bengali man who's he definitely wears this tiger skin and everything which marks his yogic status but very much he sort of resembles the married materialistic man in Bengal. So those kind of depictions the regional version of this the narratives which are from Hindu mythology as well as from the Hindu great epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata we find them there and at the same time we also have certain kind of regional variation or the flavors in infused in this imagery.

So, this all this kind of aspects we find them to be here in this kantha. So just like I mean to sum them up what we see in this kanthas is basically that we find that the geometric motifs like for example, (if we consider it here) how part of the Lotus has been sort of made much more abstracted by using certain kind of geometric scheme and then we also have the figurative elements so for example this entire narrative seen around goddess

Kali or the depiction of the Hindu Trinity like Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva and then we also have like certain mythological aspects there and then also like I mean socio-political aspects there. At the same time we also find ... how ... certain kind of personalized narratives which are also brought together. The mix of like I mean these elements, of the epics mythology and so on and the personalized narratives would perhaps be depicted by particular figures in and around in this composition and sometimes we see that to be exemplified by the use of text as well, sometime the name of the people who are dedicated to this kind of kanthas their names would be there written in Bangla script and so on. So those all this different kind of like elements we find them to be there on the kanthas.

Now the other thing we can also see it very prominently in the kanthas and that is the irregularity in design. So, for example, we can see that certain kind of scheme are used. If



we think about ... the earlier kantha that we have looked at, how it has a design, I mean how it has a border, or like two sets of borders and then there is a central motif (usually a circular motif) that we find. Then there are ... motifs in the corner that sort of directs the viewers gaze towards the center. So those kind of like scheme we definitely find them to be there in the kanthas. But at the same time we also find that there are certain kind of irregularity those are that's also very much prominent in the kanthas.

So, for example, this kantha that we see here and this is from early 20th century and again it comes from Bengal. In this one what we see that there is again that how this



broad borders or we can also consider them as like I mean this separate units (there in this corners) and then these corners are constructed and then there is this central this squarish panel that is created here. ... what we find... in this case is ... all these flowers that we find in the center (except for the ones those are the spiral motifs in these two sides) all these flowers kind of like I mean follow a similar kind of scheme.

However, if we consider the central this square a section in which we see that the central flower is there and then like four motifs in the corners they are also sort of like I mean depicted something very similar to the one we have seen earlier. But here we find that instead of having like I mean this standardized kalka motif or like this mango motif or pastel motif whatever we call it. These motifs are there present in these two corners but



not in this corner or in this corner. Now here also we find that if there is a circular motif that is created in this corner and which the scale of it is different here in this corner and what does

that mean is that a aesthetic decision or can we consider it in a different way. Now I will propose to see it from the sociological point of view in which what happens this kantha a lot of times are made by more than one person. Sometimes it can also be made by only one person sometime the women members in a family or from the neighborhood can come together and make this kanthas and that's the reason what we find that there is not really a strict design scheme that is followed throughout in the kanthas. Sometime it also happens that we find that one kantha is actually developed over generations. So if the mother starts making a kantha and keeps it unfinished then the daughter can also start and sort of like add to it and that is how ... we find that there are motifs which are added not really at the same time or like at the same go; but perhaps like I mean certain things were added it was kept aside, then it was taken up by someone else and that is how the entire

piece was completed. Those are the signs we can find them to be there why we can see there are certain kind of irregularity in the design. So when I say irregularity I do not really mean it in a negative sense, but I am trying to sort of understand that if there is a break from this regular standardized scheme of looking at the design or like the compositional format then what are the kind of choices or what are the kind of criteria those ... sort of enabled this particular kind of making of the visuals. For those reasons we also can understand that this is an act of writing and overwriting (something we have been sort of addressing this issue in this particular week) that how like making the narratives the embroidered narratives is something that comes out prevalently in making of this particular kind of textiles. So, for example if someone is making a brocade someone is making a plain woven fabric it needs to be completed until it is there in the loom or else like once it is taken out of the loom one cannot really reinstall it and make the part of it. So those kind of aspects we can consider that how it is different in terms of making this embroidered fabrics especially like something like kantha in which generations of people have worked on a single piece. So, this is the way we can see that how writing and rewriting sort of works out in kantha in a very different way from the other forms of fabric. Now textile historian Niaz Zaman has written extensively on kantha and sort of like I mean addressed a number of this issues about the community involvement, the recent revival of kantha in Bangladesh and at the same time also like the kind of visuals and aesthetics which are incorporated as part of it. We will continue this discussion on kantha and the other forms of fabric in the next installment, thank you.